

### **1. What is the U. S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) and how was it created?**

Congress created the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA). Established as an independent, bipartisan, federal government entity, USCIRF monitors the status of freedom of religion or belief abroad and provides policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress.

These recommendations are formally presented through USCIRF's Annual Report [\[HYPERLINK TO REPORT\]](#). The 2010 report covers 28 countries. Country chapters begin with a one-page overview of USCIRF's findings, the reasons for the country's designation by USCIRF, and priority recommendations for action. Each chapter documents events that took place over the reporting period, discusses relevant legal and human rights issues, emphasizes important elements of the bilateral relationship with the U.S., and details recommendations that would promote freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief as a more integral part of U.S. policy. USCIRF's annual report also includes chapters on, and recommendations for U.S. policy concerning, the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and U.S. refugee and asylum policy.

### **2. Who comprises the Commission and how are Commissioners selected?**

USCIRF is composed of nine private sector commissioners who volunteer their time in support of USCIRF's mandate, and the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom, who is a non-voting member. Commissioners are appointed by the President and Democratic and Republican leaders in the House and Senate. USCIRF is a congressionally created entity, not a non-governmental organization, interest group or advocacy organization.

The current Commissioners are: Leonard A. Leo (Chair), Elizabeth H. Prodromou (Vice-Chair), Don Argue (Vice-Chair), Talal Y. Eid, Felice D. Gaer, Richard D. Land, William Shaw, Nina Shea, and Theodore Van Der Meid. The seat filled by the State Department's Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom currently is vacant.

According to IRFA, three Commissioners are selected by the President, two by the leaders of

the President's party in Congress, and four by the congressional leaders of the party not in the White House. Commissioners are appointed for two year terms, and are eligible for reappointment. According to IRFA, Commissioners are "selected among distinguished individuals noted for their knowledge and experience in fields relevant to the issue of international religious freedom, including foreign affairs, direct experience abroad, human rights, and international law."

### **3.□□ □ What is the difference between USCIRF and the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom?**

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity, while the Office of International Religious Freedom (IRF) — also established under IRFA—is part of the U.S. State Department. Both USCIRF and the State Department release annual reports on international religious freedom, but each has different purposes. The State Department's report documents religious freedom violations in every country in the world. USCIRF's Annual Report, by statute, recommends countries to be designated as "countries of particular concern" which the Executive Branch must consider. The report also examines select countries, and while also documenting abuses, makes policy recommendations to the executive and legislative branches of government. USCIRF's report also comments on the effectiveness of the State Department's efforts to promote international religious freedom.

### **4.□□ □ How does USCIRF define violations of religious freedom and is USCIRF trying to impose American values or the American conception of separation of church and state on other countries? □**

USCIRF monitors religious freedom through the lens of international human rights standards, such as those found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides that "everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest this religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance." By relying on international human rights standards as specified in IRFA, USCIRF is not attempting to impose American values on other nations, but rather

examines the actions of foreign governments against these universal standards and by their freely undertaken international commitments.

□

### **5.□□ □ What are “countries of particular concern” (CPCs) and which countries has USCIRF recommended to be designated as CPCs?□□**

The International Religious Freedom Act requires the President, who has delegated this function to the Secretary of State, to designate as “countries of particular concern,” or CPCs, those countries that commit systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom. Pursuant to IRFA, USCIRF recommends the countries that, in its view, meet the CPC threshold and should be so designated. For countries designated as CPCs, IRFA provides the Secretary of State with a range of flexible and specific policy options (referred to as Presidential actions) to address serious violations of religious freedom. These options, which can include sanctions or a waiver of actions, are not automatically imposed.

USCIRF has recommended that the following 13 countries be designated as CPCs for 2010: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The State Department has not yet designated CPCs in 2010. In 2009, the State Department designated 8 countries as CPCs: Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Uzbekistan.

### **6.□□ □ What is USCIRF’s “Watch List,” and what countries are included on this list?**

USCIRF has established a Watch List of countries in which religious freedom conditions do not rise to the statutory level that would mandate a CPC designation but require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of religious freedom engaged in or tolerated by governments.

USCIRF has placed the following 12 countries on the Watch List for 2010: Afghanistan,

Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela.

□

### 7.□ □ What themes have guided USCIRF's recent work and advocacy?□ □

□

USCIRF has identified three themes to guide Commissioners discussions on priority countries with severe violations of religious freedom: state-sponsored hostility to and repression of religion; state-sponsored extremist ideology and education; and state failure to prevent and punish religious freedom violations (impunity). Several of the CPC countries that systematically violate religious freedom fall into all three categories.

- **State-Sponsored Hostility and Repression of Religion:** The framework of state hostility toward and repression of religion captures many of the worst violators of religious freedom including China, Iran, North Korea, Sudan, and Vietnam. These countries exhibit strong opposition to freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, either towards individual members, leaders, or entire communities, and take steps to forcefully curtail and penalize such freedoms, such as the sharing of religious beliefs or the undertaking of basic practices.

- **State-Sponsored Extremist Ideology and Education:** This threat to religious freedom highlights countries that sponsor education systems and materials that teach hatred of and intolerance and violence towards other religious groups. Two key countries fall into this category: Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. Considering the links between ideologies that motivate individuals to undertake acts of violence and the violent act themselves, the national security implications for the United States are clear.

- **State Failure to Prevent and Punish Religious Freedom Violations (Impunity):** In addition to religious persecution directly conducted by governments, another egregious threat to religious freedom occurs when governments systematically fail to punish violence committed against religiously identified individuals and their communities. USCIRF has confronted this breakdown in justice—known as impunity—in many places, and has seen the effects of such impunity firsthand—particularly on vulnerable minority religious groups—during fact-finding trips to Egypt, Nigeria, and Sudan. The absence of accountability breeds lawlessness, which encourages individuals to attack, and even kill, others who dissent from or fail to embrace their own religious views, including members of minority religious communities. Countering impunity and promoting respect for the rule of law are among the greatest challenges the United States government faces as it develops policies to effectively promote and protect freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief around the world.

### 8.□□ □ What are some of the issues USCIRF has addressed in its work and advocacy?

Along with focusing on specific countries, USCIRF also has investigated issues including the relationship between religious freedom and U.S. efforts to promote stability and counter religion-based violence and terrorism, and the so-called “defamation of religions.” Because of an explicit mandate in IRFA, USCIRF also has addressed the issue of asylum seekers in the expedited removal process.

- **Efforts to Counter Religiously-Motivated Extremist Violence:** Developments of the past decade have strengthened attention to the importance of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief, as the U.S. government navigates a world threatened by religion-based extremism and religion-imbued conflict. The issue of religious freedom has had a profound impact on America’s political and national security interests, as well as on stability throughout the world. Whether in the Middle East, Africa, South and East Asia, Europe or elsewhere, religion and the striving for religious freedom have often been explicit or implicit factors in civil strife. By the same token, religion also has been a powerful voice in building rule-of-law human rights-based democracies, as well as promoting post-conflict reconciliation. A growing body of research indicates that religious freedom is a positive factor in enabling societies to be prosperous and stable.

- **“Defamation of Religions”:** The United Nations for the past several years has passed so-called “defamation of religions” resolutions promoted by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC). These resolutions attempt to provide international legitimacy for national laws that punish blasphemy or otherwise ban criticism of a religion. In so doing, they drastically reshape and weaken universal human rights standards, including the freedoms of religion and expression. These resolutions attempt to create wide latitude for governments to restrict religious freedom and free expression, thereby promoting intolerance and human rights violations. Moreover, they deviate sharply from traditional human rights law by seeking to protect a religious institution or interpretation, rather than an individual's freedom of religion or belief. In fact, blasphemy laws in some countries have been used to justify actions that selectively curtail civil dissent, halt criticism of political structures, and restrict the religious speech of minority faith communities, dissenting members of the majority faith, and persons of no religious faith. Religious intolerance and discrimination can best be fought through efforts to encourage respect for the human rights of each individual, including the rights to freedom of religion and expression, rather than national prohibitions or international legal norms that

purport to stop criticism or “defamation” of religions.

- **Asylum Seekers in the Expedited Removal Process:** As authorized by IRFA, USCIRF issued a report in 2005 (Report on Asylum Seekers in Expedited Removal) , and followed up with a review in 2007 that identified serious flaws in the Expedited Removal process that place asylum seekers at risk of being mistreated while in detention and returned to countries where they may face persecution. To address these concerns, USCIRF issued recommendations to help protect U.S. borders and ensure fair and humane treatment for bona fide asylum seekers. USCIRF continues to focus on the issue with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), urging the agency to address areas including: the low profile and absence of inter-bureau coordination of asylum issues; the use of jail-like facilities to house asylum seekers; the absence of parole policies to ensure that asylum seekers who pose no risk of flight or danger are not subject to unnecessary detention; and insufficient oversight of the Expedited Removal process. USCIRF continues to monitor these issues, including progress on the reforms DHS announced in 2009 which, if fully implemented, would address several areas of concern USCIRF has highlighted.

□ □

### **9.□ □ □ What are some recent USCIRF activities?□ □**

In recent years, USCIRF’s activities have included visits to twenty countries; holding hearings and testifying at Congressional hearings; and supporting and addressing the concerns of a broad range of religious communities around the world. USCIRF has worked on behalf of Buddhists in Burma, Hindus in Bangladesh, Shi’a Muslims in Saudi Arabia, Jews in Venezuela, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Uighur Muslims in China, Christians in Sudan, and Baha’is in Iran. Some of USCIRF’s activities include:

- **Issuing an Annual Report:** Pursuant to its congressional mandate, USCIRF releases an Annual Report, available in hard copy and on this website, which reports on religious freedom conditions in selected countries and formulates policy recommendations for the Administration and Congress. The 2010 report covers 28 countries, as well as the United Nations, the OSCE, and U.S. expedited removal policy.
- **Recommending “countries of particular concern:”** USCIRF recommends countries the Secretary of State should designate as “Countries of Particular Concern” under IRFA for engaging in or tolerating “systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom.” When a country is designated a “Country of Particular Concern,” the President is required by law to take one of several actions, including economic sanctions, or a waiver of action.
- **Designating Watch List Countries:** USCIRF maintains a “Watch List” of countries in which religious freedom conditions require close monitoring due to the nature and extent of violations of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief that the government engages in or tolerates and annually designates countries for this list.

- **Travelling Abroad:** USCIRF has visited countries throughout the world to examine religious freedom conditions firsthand and develop more specific policy recommendations for U.S. action. Commissioners have met with heads of state, ministers, other senior government officials, representatives of human rights and other nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders, victims of religious intolerance, and others in: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, China, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iraq, Jordan, Nigeria, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Syria, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam.

- **Convening Hearings, Testifying before Congress, and Working with Congressional Offices:** USCIRF has held hearings to gather information on issues and testified at Congressional hearings on numerous subjects including the persecution of Uighurs in China, human rights in Vietnam, the status of human rights and religious freedom in Iran, and the “defamation of religions” resolutions in the United Nations. USCIRF works with Congressional offices on these and other issues.

- **Engaging Internationally:** USCIRF participates in multilateral meetings related to religious freedom including at the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. USCIRF’s work in this area has focused particularly on the problematic “defamation of religions” resolutions at the UN and multilateral efforts to combat xenophobia and related intolerance in the OSCE region. In addition, USCIRF has met with officials from the European Union, the Council of Europe, the Organization of American States, and the African Union.

- **Working with the Media:** USCIRF issues statements and press releases on a wide range of issues including, for example, the ruling on the Abyei border demarcation in Sudan; the release of Iranian Baha’is; religious persecution and government violence in China; attacks in Iraq against Christians and Muslims; attacks on Coptic Orthodox Christians in Egypt; and sectarian clashes in Nigeria.

- **Issuing Reports:** USCIRF’s recent reports include an analysis and recommendations designed to support the Comprehensive Peace Agreement between North and South Sudan; an analysis of the “defamation of religions” resolutions before the United Nations; and reports on measures to end the severe abuses of religious minorities in Iraq and the treatment of asylum seekers in Expedited Removal.

□ □

**10.□ □ Which individuals and groups are the focus of USCIRF’s work and advocacy?□ □**

USCIRF works to encourage the full enjoyment of the freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief for all. USCIRF has engaged with a diverse array of religious communities around the

world, including: Uighur Muslims in China; Baha'is and Sufi Muslims in Iran; Ahmadis and Hindus in Pakistan and Indonesia; Muslims and Christians in India; Christians, Mandeans, and Yazidis in Iraq; and Jews in Venezuela.

### **11. How does USCIRF obtain information about violations of religious freedom abroad?**

USCIRF obtains information about violations of religious freedom abroad in multiple ways, including visiting selected countries in order to observe facts on the ground, meeting regularly with foreign officials, religious leaders and groups, victims of religious intolerance, and representatives of civil society, nongovernmental organizations, government agencies, and national and international organizations, and keeping abreast of credible news reports.

How

### **12. How can you contact USCIRF?**

For more information go to USCIRF's website at [www.uscirtf.gov](http://www.uscirtf.gov) or call us at 202-523-3240

202-523-3240

end\_of\_the\_skype\_highlighting

. You also can reach us at:

United States Commission on International Religious Freedom  
800 North Capitol Street, NW  
Suite 790  
Washington, D.C. 20002